Satellite/wideband communications technicians Senior Airmen Robert Neff (upper left), Athena Hromada (upper right) and Don McCartney (bottom) set up a Quick Reaction Satellite Antenna.

Courtesy photo

COMM ON THE LAST FRONTIER

Alaska's unique challenges sharpen unit's ability to overcome adversity

By Senior Airman John Callahan
176th Wing Public Affairs

ELMENDORF AIR FORCE BASE, Alaska — From the jungles of Southwest Asia to the frigid Bering Sea, the Alaska Air National Guard's 206th Combat Communications Squadron can handle the extremes.

Based at Elmendorf Air Force Base near Anchorage, the 60-person squadron is literally a high-tech tool with the ability to deploy advanced communications infrastructure anywhere around the Pacific Rim at a moment's notice.

Unit members credit their location in Alaska with keeping them sharp and providing training challenges not present in other locations.

"The conditions here make us carefully think through everything we do, from the simplest and crudest things—living conditions, for example—all the way through to the really high-tech equipment," said the unit's commander, Maj. Jeffrey Campbell.

Chief Master Sgt. Rick Robotkay, the squadron's NCOIC, added, "The terrain and climate certainly present us with a diverse set of challenges. Just getting our equipment grounded, for example. In most places, it's a no-brainer—you put down your grounding rods, and that's that. Here, though, the frozen ground can turn it into a major operation. You need drilling equipment to get down into the permafrost, and even then you might need twice as many rods, and the whole procedure can take three times as much time. And that time can be absolutely critical when you're talking about setting up a deployed base.

"Then consider the other end of things," he continued. "At lower latitudes, if you need to lock on to your satellite, you point your dish up into the sky and boom, you're off and running. Things aren't so simple here. To connect with a satellite in geosynchronous orbit over the equator, our dish is going to be pointed at a much flatter angle—nearly parallel to the ground, in some cases. That brings another element of Alaska into the equation, the terrain. It's not a simple thing to find a satellite with a mountain in the way."

Courtesy photo

Senior Airman Beau Bellamy, a satellite/wideband communications technician with the 206th Combat Communications Squadron, adjusts a setting on the AN/TSC-152 lightweight multiband satellite terminal.

Senior Airman David Roediger, a technical systems controller and one of the squadron's newest members, added, **"The sheer distance from the equator is another separate problem. Your dish's field of view is likely to encompass a whole bunch of different satellites, so getting a lock on the one you want isn't as simple as it is other places."**

These types of challenges have molded the 206th into a model unit for the 21st century's leaner, meaner military, according to its members.

The Alaska National Guard's command chief master sergeant agrees.

Chief Campbell said his unit will leverage its flexibility by aggressively pursuing opportunities for growth.

"**The U.S. military is going through a period of change and adaptation," he said. "And that is going to open up opportunities for us to grow down the road.** Whether it's information operations functions, command-and-control or engineering and installation, there are a lot of functional areas out there closely aligned with our mission.

"When the opportunities come up for this squadron to grow and get involved in those areas, with the kind of people we've got, we're going to jump at them."

> "It's not a simple thing to find a satellite with a mountain in the way."